"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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A PLAIN FARMER'S RELIGION

By Amy Atwater

It beats all how much we jest take for granted and live our lives, goin' along peaceful-like, whether we like all of it or not. We sort o' git to thinkin' there ain't no use buckin' agin fate, and we might as well take it and make the best of it.

Now take the matter of religion. I was brought up to go to church and Sunday school, and my parents seen that I did. My fondest mem'ries of that churchgoin' are the friendships formed there with other kids of my age and the way we looked forward to Sundays so we could git together and tell each other secrets and exchange treasures. Later on I liked to go because I liked a girl that went, too. But not much Christianity got under my hide. Somehow the parson always used such big words that I never knew what he meant even when I was growed up. God seemed an awful ways off and wasn't very real to me. I never thought I could stay away from Sunday service; but it left me cold inside. I didn't git excited over it like some folks did that I knew.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH U. S.

When I got to be a man--that is, about twenty-two--I married the girl I used to go to church to look at, and she's been more'n enough pay for goin'. Well, we kept right on goin' to church and took the little shavers as soon as they could set up. We've had quite an assortment of preachers; and as I think of it now, I never got acquainted with one of 'em.

Our parsonage and church is in the village about a mile away. 'Bout every so often the preacher would come to call. Shucks! What a commotion it made! If Sarah see him comin', she'd fly around to dust a chair or two, put on a clean apron, brush back her hair, wash the young ones' faces, and sometimes call to me, if I happened to be workin' near the house that day, "Frank, be kind o' careful what you say--the minister is coming'." By the time he got there, she was mighty uncomfortable and looked it; the kids set like fence posts; and I guess a miserable time was had by all. I wonder if he wasn't jest as uneasy as us.

About once a year we had him to supper and then we did have a time. I had to dress up jest as if I wasn't a plain farmer with milkin' and chores to do same as any other day. The kids had to be drilled on special manners till I didn't know myself if they done things right or not. Sarah cooked her best dishes--and she's a great cook, too, if I do say so. Once our little Rodney snickered while the parson was tellin' somethin', and we all felt terrible disgraced.

I was always pretty puzzled when a preacher made a prayer. I dunno--he used such long words that I didn't git the meanin'; and I wasn't sure jest what he was askin' for. I got the notion that he had secrets with God, and I was on the outside--shut out. So I come to believe it was that way. Folks like me couldn't understand what 'twas all about but would have to keep on pluggin' along the best we could. I never stole or lied or cheated and I hoped that might pull me through. I was kind o' doubtful about heaven, though.

Any yet sometimes when I was plowin' a piece for corn or oats or mebbe wheat, the smell of the rich dirt and the thought of the crop I would git from it give me a strange feelin'; or I'd stop on the way to the barn to watch the sun come up or set and git the

same feelin'. Special nights when the wind blowed, makin' clouds go scuddin' across the moon, I couldn't sleep, but laid there thinkin' and sort o' thrilled. A flock of wild geese honkin' over my head would set me wonderin'. Why did they go north and south, and what guided 'em? But I kept these things to myself, bein' too shy or somethin' to ask about 'em. Anyway, what business had a poor, ignorant farmer havin' such ideas? Leave 'em to the ministers and perfessors and such.

Well, about three years ago we heard we was to have a new parson--a young feller; and I was honestly afraid to go to church the first Sunday he was here. I expected him to be right up on education, with a lot of high-falutin notions to show off, and us farmers wouldn't be in it. Of course, some of the folks in the village have had education and know what it is. Well, I nigh had the breath took out of me. He was a nice, pleasant-lookin' chap--jest the kind I'd like to see my Rodney be some day. He told us about his dreams when he was young--how he'd wanted to be a country parson--and how he wanted to be one of us and help us. He told us, too, that he knew we would help him jest as much--and that I don't understand yet. Then he talked--'twasn't exactly a sermon--about the farmer that went forth to sow; and it seemed he must've found that text for us country folks. I'll bet he did, too. Then he seemed to lose himself in his earnestness, and I knew he meant every word he said. I heard every word of it, too, and I got a warm feelin' around my heart. Somehow he made me feel important--even if I don't know more'n one language and not much o' that. He talked to the kids and the young folks, and on the way home we couldn't talk of anything but the things he'd said.

That glow around my heart didn't stop; it's been growin' for three years. And our parson--John (most everybody calls him by his first name, and no disrespect)--is like one of the family. He drops in any time, and I notice that Sarah don't bother to dust or to fix her hair, and the kids act natural. He appears to like 'em and to expect 'em to be jest as they be and don't act displeased if they are naughty. He comes right out in the lot where I'm workin' and talks to me about my work and about nature. I've told him of all the things that thrill and puzzle me and I wasn't a bit ashamed of it. I recollect one rainy day last spring I was in the barn tryin' to fix a hoe handle and I couldn't do it. Without any effort I let go of a little cuss word. At that minute I heard John's pleasant voice behind me: "Don't things go right today?" Well, I felt awful cheap; but that happenin' done more good than any sermon. And then if he didn't fix the handle himself in a jiffy!

I mustn't git so wrapped up in tellin' about John that I fergit his wife. Oh, yes, he's married, and they've got a little boy--a lively young feller, too. Well, she's jest as nice in her place as John is in his. I always say a parson's wife does jest as much good or harm in a community as he does. Yes, Agnes (ain't that a pretty name?--not too stuck-up and not too common--jest fits her)--Agnes is one of the family, same as ne is. Sometimes he drives out early on summer mornin's, and she comes along in her everyday dress and talks to Sarah about the housework--sewin' and cannin' and such. Sarah was proud as a peacock when Agnes called and asked for her receipt for mustard pickles. Though she is so homeylike, we all know she is above us in lots of ways--in learnin' and religion and plain goodness. She has the knack of makin' us want to be good by praisin' our good points and overlookin' our bad ones. Then she's always on hand to help in sickness or comfort us in times of trouble. Things don't seem near so hard to bear when she's around.

Then, when we have a sociable, her and John know the beatin'est games that take us all in down to the littlest ones. And I see the young folks ain't afraid to act natural and have a good time, knowin' it won't b frowned on.

I've noticed lately there's a friendlier spirit growin' among the church members. More of the village folks come to call on us out in the country, and the young folks mix more and like each other. Besides, we're reachin' out to the farmers way back on the hills. The women come down sometimes to meetin's that Agnes has at the parsonage. And that's another thing: That old parsonage has sort o' renewed its youth. I can remember the time when I'd make all kinds of excuses to git out o' stoppin' there on errands. But it's come alive, and now I often run in, when I have to go to the village, just to git a bit of cheer to start off the day.

John gives us some good sermons, and when he prays he says jest the things I'd ask for if I could (I'm practicin' out in the field, though). But I've found out a minister's work ain't only makin' sermons for the pulpit--the way I used to think. Why, John--he scatters sermons all through the week by his callin' and helpin' and even by his livin'. And him and his little wife have so many things to interest us in that we don't have time to think of grudges or gossip.

Now, I ain't blamin' all the other preachers we've had. Mebbe they tried to be jest what they thought w wanted, and we're to blame. I guess they went about their duty as they seen it. I realize, too, that the world is changin' in every way.

I'm sure of one thing: I shan't worry 'bout gittin' religion. I've had it all the time inside me. I didn't know what it was or how to let it out. John is showin' me. And when I know there's folks like him an Agnes in the world, it's easier to do right and it's easier to see what Christ was like and wants us to be. Now'days I've got a lot to think about when I'm at my work. I know I've got a place in the world, and that thought gives me sort of a settled feelin'. I can see a divine hand in the clouds and sunsets, in the rain and wind, and in my crops; and, without any disrespect, God is jest like one of my family.

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Mrs. Atwater lives at Brooktondale, New York. She has been a stenographer, a teacher, and is now a rural home-maker. She was brought up on a small farm. The picture she draws of the rural minister and his wife is not imaginary but patterned from real life. This is her first published article.